New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1949

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THEATRE OPENINGS

"Funzapoppin"

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NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK SUN

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"Funzapoppin"

Journal American

JULY 1, 1949

It Doesn't Make Sense But It's Lots of Fun

By ROBERT GARLAND

In the Garden called Madison Square, Olsen and Johnson are raising a bumper crop of merriment. Under Catherine Littlefield's firm overall direction, this "Funzapoppin" is funnier than many a fisticuff I've seen. Funnier, say, than Billy Fox versus Jake La Motta.

Corn is still the Olsen and Johnson specialty. And there's nothing wrong with corn when the boys from Bedlam throw it unblushingly your way. Frequently, they throw the cob along with it. That's fun, too, from Ole and Chic.

All of which leads to the report that, after workouts in Chicago and Indianapolis, Olsen and Johnson have brought "Funzapoppin" into the Madison Square Garden following a sneak preview on television. We natural-born corn catchers are happy.

For "Funzapoppin" contains much that's typical of "Hellzapoppin," New Year's Eve., "Laffin' Room Only," Custer's Last Stand, "Sons o' Fun," Doomsday, The Circus, "Ladies Night in a Turkish Bath," Lemonade Opera, Little Miss Muffit, Lady Godiva—

I can't think of a thing that isn't in it!

* * *

Yes, Of Course

As Ole and Chic point out, any resemblance between "Funzapoppin" and a normal theatre production is impossible. Which could be why it's in Madison Square Garden, which is no garden, and isn't even in Madison Square. Not a program knows what's coming.

Why should you or I, Ole or Chic, worry about the sequence of sinking battleships, phoney pants, real revolvers, rubber dummies, iron panties, fiery blowtorches, midget Santa Clauses, dead ducks, live Napoleons, explosive slot machines—

These and Marty May, The Berry Brothers, Bill Hayes, The Choraleers, Johnny Howes, The Precisionists, Frank Cook, The Little People, Gloria Gilbert, Russ Bobey, Helen Magna, Andy Ratouscheff and Jack Joyce come on, go off, come on again.

And they're hindered by the purposeful interference of Olsen and Johnson, Ole's son, J. C., and Chic's daughter, June. J. C., who, to quote his father, looks like he's been dead for quite some time, is laughably macabre.

But Chic Johnson's June looks pretty and alive.

* * *

Funniest Fun

In the first of the two acts, "It's a Great Big Wonderful World" is the big production. An "Around the World in Eighty Minutes." June Johnson and Bill Hayes are up in an airplane on their honeymoon. Below, the world moves from Venice to Harlem.

But, as the informed Olsen and Johnson fan behind me explained to her doubting Thomas, you ain't seen no production number until you've seen "The Good Old West" which, for some indifferent reason, moves from Arizona right into the Arctic.

Then, after Chic Johnson has escaped from a pair of handcuffs by the simple expedient of tearing off his arm, the corn catchers in the audience go up on the stage while the corn tossers on the stage come down into the audience and give good things away.

It's audience participation, all right, with the off-stage boys dancing with the on-stage girls while, tap dancers tap, stilt dancers stilt, one-legged one-leg-it, tumblers tumble, and the entire company goes into a grand finale.

Even without good sense, "Funzapoppin's" the funniest fun in town.

"FUNZAPOPPIN"

A musical carnival starring Ole Olsen and Chic Johnson, dances and staging by Catherine Littlefield, assisted by Carl Littlefield, words and music by Mr. Olsen, Mr. Johnson, Chuck Gould and Perry Martin, presented by Mr. Olsen, Mr. Johnson and Arthur M. Wirtz at Madison Square Garden, June 30, 1949, with a cast including the following: Marty May, June Johnson, J.C.Olsen, the Six Mighty Atoms, Gloria Gilbert, the Berry Brothers, Baron Hopper, Gloria Short, William Hayes, Frank Cook, Andy Ratouscheff, Shirley Ann Russo, Andy Wollandi, Helen Magna, Shorty Renna and the Choraleers.

DAILY NEWS

JULY 1, 1949

Olsen, Johnson Bring an Intimate Ruckus to the Cozy Mad. Sq. Gdn.

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Ole Olsen and Chic Johnson, serious-minded gentlemen who are fanatically devoted to the good things of the drama, have brought New York its first glimpse of the famed Arena Theatre which has been developed in the outposts of Dallas, Tex., and Pasadena, Calif. Not many of us have been fortunate and erudite enough to witness the marvelously simple yet uncannily effective offerings of Margo Jones and Gilmor Brown in their desert retreats —but now we can see what these pioneers have been at by witnessing a performance of "Funzapoppin" at Madison Square Garden.

The first of these local Arena Theatre performances was given last evening, and Mr. Johnson and Mr. Olsen hope to remain in General Kilpatrick's intimate little joint until the hockey season starts or somebody revives girls' softball —which, by the way, was a good game and a fine entertainment.

Intimacy Is the Goal.

As you must know if you have been reading the more thoughtful papers, the Arena Theatre, or theatre-in-the-round, is a device for bringing the drama into the audience. Instead of you sitting down here and the actors posing up there, as is the case in the conventional, or fourth-wall, playhouse, the new art form has the players perform right in your midst.

Indeed, Olsen and Johnson have gone beyond your midst. If you are not wary, an actor or an old banana may land in your lap.

Such intimacy has its charms, I guess. Last evening's first-nighters showed unaffected delight at having pistols fired off next to their ears and at seeing Johnson and Olsen struggling with a vast supporting company. For every gunshot there was a bathroom joke, and for every scream from an actress there was a scream from some female in the audience upon whom, one presumes, some sort of dirty trick was played like blowing her skirt above her ears with an air hose.

"Funzapoppin" is about the same as the other shows like "Hellzapoppin" at the Winter Garden. Fireworks, airplane launchings, midgets and gadgets. But Madison Square Garden is more intimate than the Winter Garden, and you can see the stage hands changing the scenery.

Good Specialties.

Mr. Olsen and Mr. Johnson have called to their support a large company of dancing girls and boys and some good and familiar specialty acts. The Berry brothers, Negro dancers, do an extraordinarily deft routine. Marty May tells some jokes and does some imitations. Gloria Gilbert, the spinning toe-dancer, proves once more that she probably is the only dame in the world who never gets dizzy. Must be a lonesome life.

I had to leave the Arena Theatre before everything was over last evening, so nobody gave me a six-bit piece of ice or a live pig. But I did keep the lady who was with me from getting conked by a flung banana by making a Pete Reiser catch, and was pretty proud of myself. There's nothing like audience participation to make people feel at home in the drama.

But the next time I go to Madison Square Garden to see "Funzapoppin" I am going to bring my own fruit and guns and join in the fun that Olsen and Johnson are having.

The New York Times

JULY 1, 1949

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Since Olsen and Johnson are amiable mountebanks, it would be pleasant to be genuinely enthusiastic about the jamboree that they brought to Madison Square Garden last evening. Working on their familiar principle that ten mediocre gags are equivalent to one that is good, they have stuffed "Funzapoppin" full of noise, insanity, shooting and boisterousness, not forgetting the hearty hospitality that has made them thousands of loyal friends.

The audience is greeted at the door with clowns, ushered to its seats with clowns, sprinkled with feathers from the rafters and assaulted with beans and corn in the darkness. Olsen and Johnson are basically masters of ceremony, greeting the customers and luring them into the spirit of the show. As comedians their talents are limited to fantastic changes of costumes, a little mugging and a lot of shooting. Not since the hot war stopped have so many shots been fired in public.

* * *

Some of the gags are very funny and familiar, too. Shooting at the picture of a battleship that returns the fire and then sinks—that's funny, believe it or not. Olsen and Johnson as irate baby sitters for some of the most savage brats of the day; Olsen blowing one arm off in a violent attempt to wriggle out of handcuffs in five seconds; Olsen and Johnson as aggressive barbers in a railroad station that shakes every time a train races through—these also are funny incidents that pop out of the wild disorder of their carnival.

Olsen's alarmingly attenuated son, J. C., tall and skinny, has one or two good turns. Johnson's daughter, June, is pretty and talented. Pick one in ten of the gags that explode like a string of firecrackers and you have some good carnival entertainment.

* * *

But without wishing to spoil the party, your correspondent has a greater fondness for comedians who have not merely a relish for picnic fun but a sense of comedy. Marty May is about the only performer in "Funzapoppin" who comes in this category. His cartoons of some lush radio singers are skillful and caustic, and represent a comic point of view. Something also should be said in appreciation of Andy Wollandi's friendly, droll and inventive clowning in the audience before the show begins and during the intermission. It has the true spirit of improvisation.

As a matter of fact, "Funzapoppin" is a gargantuan hoaky-tonk presided over by two good-natured tent-show spielers who believe more in quantity than quality. The singing and chorus interludes are tasteless and untalented, and the unit set looks like a gigantic, neon-lighted funeral urn.

Olsen and Johnson have such a good time at their own party that it is no doubt ungrateful for a guest to criticize the quality of the cocktails and the cooking. They are hospitable hosts, but they are not comedians at heart.

New York Post
HOME NEWS

JULY 1, 1949

Good News or Warning: Olsen and Johnson Back

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

It is probably enough to say that Olsen and Johnson, the world's noisiest comedians, are back in town, noisier than ever, and certainly no less vulgar, and that they are continuing their lucrative practice of beating down the frayed nerves of the masochistic citizenry by the sheer force of their sound and fury. This time, finding that the ordinary theatres are not big enough for them, they have taken over Madison Square Garden, erected a stage at the Ninth Avenue end of the structure, and are shooting off even more ammunition than before.

As usual, their graceful little concoction, now known as "Funzapoppin," darts up and down the aisles of the auditorium, pulls not-to-reluctant playgoers from their seats to participate foolishly in the activities, and employs so many odd and frantic-looking stooges that it must frequently be difficult for the spectators to tell whether the fellow sitting next to them is one of the actors or just a drama critic. The attack on the nervous system is incessant, thunderous, rather harrowing, and occasionally, I must admit, pretty funny.

A Thought

It is a somewhat chastening thought that, if modern plumbing and explosives had never been invented, Olsen and Johnson could never have become a national institution. Take away their cap pistols and their bathroom fixtures, and you would leave them virtually bound and gagged, which might not be such a terrible idea. Not even their most enthusiastic admirer would claim that they are personally very funny, but, in addition to their uninhibited vulgarity, they unquestionably have endless pace, vitality and enthusiasm.

Their chief virtue is that they possess a kind of cockeyed inventiveness that can be insanely comic at moments. I have an ugly suspicion that their few serious musical numbers come closer to hilarity than their maniacal striving after humorous effect, but that frenzied determination of theirs to make you laugh, if they have to club you into submission in the process, does manage to get results. And there are a couple of idiotic sketches, one in a barber shop and another, of course, in a bedroom, which have enough wild and primitive slapstick to entertain even the captious.

The Audience

The audience, of course, is the victim and hero of the evening. I am not merely referring to those spectators, who, having only themselves to blame, are dragged out into the aisles to dance with the chorus girls and then find themselves up on the stage being made to look even sillier than usual. Even those of us who stayed timorously and sensibly in our seats were subjected to such a constant bombardment of missiles, prop giant spiders, actors and gunfire that either Olsen or Johnson, whichever it was, spoke the truth when he told us that, if we weren't amused, we were at least being kept awake.

Let me pay the boys that tribute at least: You don't go to sleep when they are around. If you did, you would probably wake up dangling from the roof. As for the amount of shooting that goes on, there probably wasn't as much of it during the entire Spanish-American War. As you may have guessed by this time, I am not among the more rhapsodic fans of the Messrs. Olsen and Johnson, but there can be no doubt that they have hit upon a formula which has made two distinctly minor comics unique and triumphant figures in present-day show business.

New York World-Telegram

JULY 1, 1949

'Funzapoppin' Opens, A Jolly Nightmare

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Just as there are good and bad dreams, there must be something like a cheerful nightmare, and if there is, it's Olsen and Johnson's "Funzapoppin," which began last night to help shorten the life of Madison Square Garden.

The big arena is used to variety, from opera stars at benefits to Gorgeous George, but it has probably never been more astonished than it is right now. From the opening gun (literal) to the last chorus (rousing), there is not a quiet, still or dull moment.

There are no rules about "Funzapoppin." It comes down out of the ceiling, up from the cellar and in from every side, all the time yelling at the top of its voice. Even if there is something else going on, and inevitably when there is not, pistol shots resound through the place at a deafening rate.

Get the Mood Outside.

Gorillas rush through the aisles, soldiers drop from the darkness over head and weird characters have their say from the top-gallery.

The mood meets you just off the sidewalk, where clowns are cordial with gags and misdirections. Inside more of them busily direct the customers to the wrong seats and escort as many as they have time for across the stage.

There is an enormous dancing chorus that willing does everything from ballet on its toes to square-dancing in the aisles. And the show itself resembles a spangled meatloaf made of a history of show business. There is not a sight laugh known to man that is neglected.

And Midgets, Too.

There are many production numbers, some of them in a crazy Western melodrama, and others in a tour round the world, while a romantic couple rides an aeroplane up above the stage.

A troupe of midgets is frequently in evidence, and surprisingly enough each appearance seems reasonably motivated in a performance that makes excuses for nothing.

The producing and starring team of Olsen and Johnson works hard, as indeed does everybody else in the cast. Just for pure physical stamina this gang deserves medals, if they have not already given them to each other, probably engraved in invisible ink on ice.

There can be no argument about whether all this is funny or not. It is so fast, so furious, so frank and so eager, startling you into hysterics most of the time, that the evening is over before you realize just how dizzy you have become.

You can forget about any radio competition for this one, because you are likely to come home with a live pig, a set of silver, a radio or a cake of ice, just for laughs.